

The Legend of John Henry

Traditional – adapted and performed by Johnny Cash

Johnny Henry's pappy woke him up one midnight
He said "Before the sheriff comes I wanna tell you," Said "Listen boy
Learn to hoist a jack and learn to lay a track learn to pick and shovel too
And take that hammer, It'll do anything you tell it to."

John Henry's mammy had about a dozen babies
John Henry's pappy broke jail about a dozen times
The babies all got sick and when the doctor wanted money
He said, "I'll pay you a quarter at a time startin' tomorrow
that's the pay for a steel driver on this line."

Then the section foreman said, "Hey! Hammer-swinger!
I see you your own hammer boy but, what all can them muscles do?" and he said,
"I can turn a jack I can lay a track I can pick and shovel too."
"Can you swing a hammer, boy?" "Yes sir, I'll do anything you hire me to."

Spoken:

"Now ain't you somethin'! So high and mighty with all that muscle! Just go
ahead, boy. Pick up that hammer, pick up the hammer!"

He said to get a rusted spike and swing it down three times
I'll pay you a nickel a day for every inch you sink it to
Go on and do what you say you can do

With a steel-nosed hammer on a four foot switch handle
John Henry raised it back til' it touched his heels then
The spike went through the cross-tie and split it half in two
Thirty-five cents a day for drivin' steel
"Sweat! Sweat, boy! Sweat! Only two more swings!"
"I was born drivin' steel"

Well John Henry hammered in the mountain
He'd give a grunt he give a groan every swing
The women-folks from miles around heard him and come down
To watch make the coal-steel ring "Lord! What a swinger!
Watch him make the coal-steel ring"

But the bad boys came up laughin' at John Henry
They said, "Your full of vinegar now but you bout' through!"

We gonna get a steamdrill to do your share of drivin'
Then what's all them muscles gonna do? Huh? John Henry?
Gonna take a little bit of vinegar out of you."

John Henry said, "I feed for little brothers
and baby sisters' walkin' on her knees
Now did the Lord say that machines ought to take place of livin'?
And what's a substitute for bread and beans? I ain't seen it!
Do engines get rewarded for their steam?

John Henry hid in a coal mine for his dinner nap
Had thirty minutes to rest before the bell
The mine boys hollered, "Get up whoever you are and get a pickax
Mine me enough to start another hell and keep it burnin'
Mine me enough to start another hell.

John Henry said to his captain said "A man ain't nothin' but a man
but if you'll bring that steamdrill 'round I'll beat it fair and honest.
I'll die with that hammer in my hand but, I'll be laughin',
cause you can't replace a steel-drivin' man.

There was a big crowd of people at the mountain.
John Henry said to the steam-drill "How is you?
(spoken) Pardon me, Mister Steamdrill I suppose you didn't hear me. Huh?
Well, can you turn a jack? Can you lay a track? Can you pick and shovel too?
Listen, this hammer-swingin' talkin' to you.

(Faster.....)
Two-thousand people hollered, "Go John Henry!!!!!"
Then somebody hollered, "The mountain's cavin' in!!!!!"
John Henry told the captin, "Tell the kind-folks not to worry
It ain't nothin' but my hammer suckin' wind, it keeps me breathin'
This steel-driver's muscle it ain't thin.

"Captain tell the people to move back farther
I'm at the finish line and there ain't no drill
It's so far behind that it don't got the brains to quit it
When she blows up she'll scatter cross the hills Lord, Lord
When she blows up she'll scatter cross the hills"

(Slower.....)
(Spoken)

Well, John Henry had a little woman
I believe the lady's name was Paulie Ann yeah that was his good woman
John Henry threw his hammer over his shoulder and went on home
He laid down to rest his weary back and early next mornin' he said,
"Come here Paulie Ann, come here sugar.
You know I believe this is the first time there ever was the sun come
and I couldn't come up. Take my hammer, Paulie Ann and go to that railroad
Swing that hammer like you seen me do it
They'll all know your John Henry's woman but tell em' that ain't all you can
do
Tell em'.....

I can hoist a jack and I can lay a track I can pick and shovel too.
Ain't no machine can that's been proved to you!

There was a big crowd of mourners at the church house
The section hands laid him in the sand
Trains go by on the rails John Henry laid.
They slow down and take off the hats, the men do
when they come to the place where he's laying' retsina' his back.
They say, "Mornin' Steel-driver, you sure was a hammer-swinger."
Then they go on by pickin' up a little bit of speed.
Clickity clack clickity clack clickity clack clickity clack

(Fade.....)

Yonder lies a steel-drivin' man lord lord
Yonder lies a steel-drivin' man
Yonder lies a steel-drivin' man lord lord
Yonder lies a steel-drivin' man
Yonder lies a steel-drivin' man lord lord
Yonder lies a steel-drivin' man